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[*The Great Invisible* by Leslie Thornton, 35 min. 16mm preliminary version, 1993, 90 min. 16mm version in process]

I. The Film Which Makes the Case

From the script: Trophimovsky (Eberhardt's father): "If it were at all well done, Isabelle, this might be interesting. But as it stands, it's a bit vulgar...and rough. You can do better than this... You should not waste your time. And you should certainly not waste my time. So pack up this little display of yours, and your entourage, and go practice elsewhere... This is not appropriate behavior FOR THE LIBRARY!"

Writing in the midst of a work, or a work in progress - writing the progress of a work filled with interruptions - a project by Leslie Thornton, *The Great Invisible*, in the form of a thirty-five minute work, a film on its way to completion, a beginning which, as Lucian says, "is half the whole," upon which, as Ausonius says, one "begins again."

The Great Invisible - which is the invisibility of the signifier itself - is mapped upon (if stuttering speechlessness, "quietism," is a mapping) the life of Isabelle Eberhardt, 1877-1904, a "daughter of the Victorian age" who eventually led a double life of Muslim and libertine. She was the illegitimate child of a nihilist and "Pope" of the Russian Orthodox Church, who educated her. At 20, Eberhardt fled to the deserts of the Mahgreb, where, dressed as a man, she gained acceptance into the Arab community. She travelled throughout the oases of Algeria, scandalizing the French colonialists, living within a "predominately" masculine milieu. She was and is regarded as a fool, spy, or saint. She took lovers as she pleased. After marriage with an Arab clerk and years of debauchery, in 1904 she slipped out of a hospital where she was being treated for malaria, for a reunion with her husband. Following a night of drinking and "passion," she was swept away, along with her mud house, in a flash flood. There is a revival of interest in her life and writings.

The film constantly slips past the broken narrative; Isabelle is played by four actresses who may even appear in the same scene, one after the other. But she is "played" by none of them, and the succession becomes meaningless; instead, Isabelle shimmers, uncaught and rarely vocal, often silenced. In fact, the "getting" of Isabelle, by film, by her father, by gender, by the mechanism of projection itself, is a major part of the work.

Let us keep in mind all that I have said, with its allusions and rough style, in order to operate upon the signifier, that which *stands-for* the signified, which is often psychoanalytically mined as subtext or textual unconscious. Signifier and signified are assumed to co-exist within a temporal framework, held by a subject whose only leanings towards psychosis is that imaginary or pictorial realm of the signified - in other words, what one "conjures up" when a word is spoken.

The leaning-towards psychosis is a result of a *withdrawal from the real* which occurs with any conjuring.

In *The Great Invisible*, a different ordering appears, that of a temporal detumescence or slackening - an order associated, if you like, with a postmodernism in which temporality collapses, embedding the subject in a

fantasm of history, non-history - a fantasm of eternity. How does this ordering - which is in fact original and radical and the occasion for this essay - appear?

In *The Great Invisible*, the body is on display: Isabelle plays/mimes Sarah Bernhardt; the family (Isabelle's with reference to Zola's) is photographed in the nude; Thornton plays Isabelle's mother with obvious anguish; Anna, a German prostitute, is photographed as an odalisque by a French photographer in his studio. The body appears as a screen, expanse of skin, "exotic" clothing - desire and spectacle; it is a *written* but speechless body, whose signs are indecipherable. Sections of the soundtrack, in Arabic, remain untranslated. At times, speech is represented by title cards, as in a silent movie. The style of the work is designed to thrust the film back into an indeterminate past. Near the beginning, Thomas Edison speaks on the 50th anniversary of the phonograph - the sound is distorted: "You and I are very widely separated physically, but a great distance in miles. But time and space have been annihilated, for us, and our minds meet, and speech is instantaneous." (Archival footage.) At the end, Edison attempts to speak ("Mr. Edison Speaks"); the film cuts away. When speech speaks, time envelops the subject; the annihilation of time is a silencing within the throat, where neurasthenia appears as a form of choking (Isabelle's mother). The displayed/splayed body is given as the fallen of speech; speech "gets" Isabelle.

The silence or silencing of Isabelle, its relation to "railroad spine" from which her mother suffered, is a silencing in the face of the sublime - the sublimation of voice, vocality, *comprehension*, into immensity - an immensity which wells up within her, an "ecstatic feeling welling in my breast." This is *not* a facile Orientalism hiding European imperialism; the oceanic loses itself in the desert. As the film fluxes and stutters, vistas (desert and ocean) appear and disappear, breaking as waves break (upon nothing, upon desire); the film becomes oddly comfortable, a subterfuge, tunneling the viewer through a maternal body. This tunneling, implied by an "oversaturation of beauty and strangeness," is through a receptacle or *chora* (Julia Kristeva's term) in which conflicting drives (body/imperialism/gender/speech/death/desire) clash; on the other side of the *chora* (and a railroad tunnel appears twice in the film), partial images appear and disappear, somewhat coherent, as if they *were written or spoken with dashes - ellipses ...*

II. The Case Made for the Film

From the script: Scrolled text: "You speak and I start laughing. Corpses come to life. I'm trying not to talk gibberish today, though totally lost and wandering."

Invert Bazin, and suppose cinema divorced, not only from representation, but also from film - divorced even from structuralism-materialism (dependent upon the physical apparatus itself). Instead of a debated "language of cinema," one begins with chaos, a cinema *cutting through the signified* by simultaneously invoking its *fullness or excess*, while emphasizing its relative *poverty* (being poor and being impoverished *in a passive sense*).

The fullness or excess is given (*is in*) the leaking of meaning everywhere, inchoate symbolization, a "period approach" that cuts through any specific temporality. In the script, the film begins with a "TITLE CARD: *Pay Attention to Date*". Dates, however, dissolve in a lushness, at times repetitive (the same shots of Algiers, for example) that envelops the viewer. The "period approach" becomes a stain upon/within the subject - a stain which is a "Great Invisible," or horizon of *empty time*. The stain, in short, is the *coloration* of the film, which veers around the early twentieth century like a virtual reality dragster in the year 2000. Veering refuses a specificity of meaning; instead, one chaotically leans into strange attractors which have the appearance of signification in their dissolution.

If fullness or the surplus of the signified is given in the leaking of meaning, poverty is not an inverse, but an interpenetrated obverse of that fullness. Poverty appears in the throat, once again, in that (somewhat

hysteric, somewhat neurasthenic) constriction or suffocation of speech (and if not speech, meaning) that characterizes *The Great Invisible*; it is a poverty conditioned by technological (Edison, railroad) or social/gender (Isabelle, Isabelle...) irruptions, interruptions. This poverty is both a *condition* of speech (its emergence its originary trace), any speech (as conversations for example are *only* part-objects, interruptions) - a conditioning urging the subject to find his/her place in the midst of placelessness. For *placelessness*, not the relativity of space/place and time, characterizes this century and the next, from the specifics of nomadicism (Mahgreb wandering), to those *sourceless* psychological diseases, schizophrenia, manic/depressive syndrome, anorexia, hysteria, "railroad spine," neurasthenia - thus for "placeless" read "sourceless," touching on late twentieth-century deconstruction, and on symbolic flows or emissions, without beginning and end...

I say "sourceless," the state of this film of the effacement or getting of Isabelle (or conversely Isabelle *getting the film*) in the sense of a *victimless crime*, a drugging or prostitution (both given within and without *The Great Invisible*), a *seduction*. Weaning, the refusal of the maternal, is refused; there is no ego-production "at the other end" of the process; there is no process, and hardly progress, only a flood of railroads, camels, ships. Weaning is "naturally" the origin of time which is contrary to this film and its expectations; the maternal transforms the *spectator* into a *viewer*, a movement from spectacle (or cinematic *display*) to view. This is not, however, a return to a fictive "pre-Oedipality," but the caress of an isolated sememe operating upon desire, history, speech, and the body itself.

If a sememe can be defined as a sphere of semiosis (sign production within a broad family of usages), an isolated sememe is always the beginning of psychosis - and power. Cut off from the everydayworld, it operates aggressively upon it; suffocated, it may return as imperialism or religious exaltation. The comfort of the maternal is also the discomfort of the abject, where ego and non-ego interpenetrate; in the film, the ego is boundless as the desert and ocean present fictional horizons depending on the *placement* of the body in the first place. In this sense, *to place oneself* is to be without place: *"*On the way back to New York, Bernhardt roared with laughter at the thought of Racine's incestuous heroine meeting the puritan Yankee Doodle in the frozen wilds of New Jersey...*"* (scrolled text at the beginning of the film, with reference to Edison).

Sourceless, rooted in desire and the social, the matrix of a limitless desert (for Isabelle did not grow up with the markings of the region), the underlying hysteria and neurasthenia of the film twists the narrative and sequencing into a confluence of sublimated drives; what does not "appear" at one point either appears in another or continues in a broken/prosthetic mode (and what could be made of prosthesis in relation to *The Great Invisible*! - virtual time, learning a language, oceans, the self-conscious critical Orientalism of the "other," camels, the desert - all are misguided, derailed. Ron Vawter (from the Wooster Group who also played the psychiatrist in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*), playing a French officer, has the only traditionally scripted lines in the film; his speech is derailed by his secretary, busy drawing in an apparent state of near-psychosis. Vawter's scenes end confusedly; the script itself is called into question, displaced by a "visible" (the drawing), broken down. The drawing itself in close-up looks like skin; the body is once again referenced (and elsewhere, the body itself is written, with the appearance of heavily tattooed hands). The script and phallus (Vawter's rigidity is in contrast to the rest of the film) are not so much defeated as rendered placeless, sourceless...

Certainly a final example, a critical one, is that of sexuality itself; the body is neither hidden nor revealed (camera, clothing, cinema!), but *_deferred_*; *_breast* images seduce the viewer, but into what? A continuous unraveling...

III The Case Beyond Which

From the script: Anarchist #1: “Nein!...Our comrade...claims... that the State...responds...with respect to the attentat. Yes, the State responds with respect, but the respect of the State takes the form of VIOLENCE AGAINST US! OUR RANKS HAVE BEEN DECIMATED BY THE BULLETS AND THE BOMBS OF THE STATE, AND BY PROVOCATEURS WHO ARE SENT BY THE STATE INTO OUR OWN RANKS!!”

In the film, speaking is caught in the maw, glottal stop, Edison and the *mechanical* insignia of existence. Early representations operated with mechanism throughout; they stuttered. Repetitive pistons and cams moved locomotives and film; intermittent motion is translated into rotary motion and back again. (Integration: opposites are smoothed.) Throughout the century, mechanism gives way to electricity, which gives way to the electronic, cyberspace and beyond. Thought leaves the material domain as Isabelle (dis)locates herself without compass or the Sony _Pyxis, which “makes use of the U.S. government’s Global Positioning System (GPS), an array of satellites orbiting 12,625 miles above the planet. Each satellite gives off a coded identification signal that Pyxis GPS detects and calculates relative to the other satellites, and it’s accurate to about 30 meters. In specific terms, Pyxis GPS can provide data on your present position, where you want to go, and how to get there.” Both Pyxis and “there” are relative of course...

Displaced Isabelle dies, swept away in a flood going nowhere; cinematically, her body extends through a white dress chaotically breaking the contours of the body. The voiceover is Thornton’s own, finding a place for speech only in death’s description, for *that* horizon has not yet given way to the eternity of the digital domain. (Think of the phrasing of P.J. Harvey or Jarboe’s choking out M. Gira’s words, the upper-throat violence of Bratmobile. Words *caught in the throat* force the presence of death; Harvey reminds the obsessive neurotic of its death-drive. This music and *The Great Invisible* operate upon the hinge of the millennium, dragging speech back into the swollen body which continues to exist. Think of *wild dynamics*.)

If the rough opening of the twentieth-century gave us Melies’ man-in-the-moon with a *rocket in his eye*, the equally rough ending gives us the same.

IV. Caselessness

From the script: Mother speaks: “‘I would have shared the dangers that you had to face, and even insisted on leading the way...’”

Traditionally, the conclusion is that *The Great Invisible* is itself a new mode of cinematic presentation, in which surface style (which in this work is comparable to traditional collage/montage) appears only as a surface eruption of deeper drives - not those of the “unconscious” (artistic or otherwise), but those of the body sited/sighted in a landscape both excessive and impoverished.

That conclusion is countermanded by a deconstructive approach to landscape which demands that the spectacle is given by the spectator - and that the spectator is sited. The *chora*, however, is unsited; there are no conclusions to be drawn (no perspective from which to draw). The result is the blank page of Edison’s speechlessness.

The throat itself is that uncanny and indeterminate area behind only the eyes and genitals in obdurate and unparalleled pain.